

Trauma and Delinquency

JDAI Research and Policy Series

A trauma-informed service system is one in which all parties involved recognize and respond to the impact of traumatic stress on those who have contact with the system. Programs and agencies within such a system infuse and sustain trauma awareness, knowledge, and skills, using the best available science, into their organizational cultures, practices, and policies. By responding to the needs and strengths of young people in our juvenile justice system, systems can improve life outcomes for the youth in their care.

What We Know:

Adolescents enter the juvenile justice system with significant and complicated trauma histories.

- Research shows that while up to 34% of children in the United States have experienced at least one traumatic event, between 75% and 93% of youth entering the justice system annually in this country are estimated to have experienced some degree of trauma.²

Detention makes trauma worse.

Detention is an additional traumatic experience. Removal of a child from the home, even for a brief period is in itself a traumatic event. Institutional placement removes a youth from his or her supports and exposes them to a negative peer culture.⁷

Confinement has been shown to exacerbate symptoms of PTSD.¹

- Compared to a national sample of youth, youth in detention were three times more likely to have been exposed to multiple types of violence and traumatic events.³
- Rates of Post Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD) in juvenile justice-involved youth are estimated between 3%-50% making it comparable to the PTSD rates of soldiers returning from deployment in Iraq (12%-20%).⁴
- Gang-involved youth demonstrate symptoms of PTSD at over twice the rate of other youth.⁵

- A study of 471 Massachusetts juveniles referred to the court clinic showed that 63% of the Massachusetts juveniles had experienced four or more Adverse Childhood Experiences (ACEs), compared to 12.5% in a national study.⁶

"If we are to fulfill the goals of the juvenile justice system – to make communities and victims whole, to rehabilitate young offenders while holding them accountable, and to help children develop skills to be productive and succeed – we must rethink the way the juvenile justice system treats, assesses, and evaluates the children within it."¹

These trauma histories affect their development and behavior, leading to delinquency.

- When young people experience prolonged or repeated violence, their bodies and brains adapt by becoming focused on survival, which reduces their ability to delay impulses and gratification.¹
- Exposure to violence leads to distrust, hypervigilance, impulsive behavior, isolation, addiction, lack of empathy or concern for others, and self-protective aggression. Distrust and disregard for adults, rules and laws place the youth at a much greater risk for delinquency and other inappropriate behaviors.¹



Photo taken by Richard Ross

www.juvenile-in-justice.com

The effect of trauma is cumulative: the greater the number of traumatic events that a child experiences, the greater the risk to that child's development and his or her emotional and physical health.⁴

Promising Practices:

National research shows that trauma-informed care is the first step in ensuring that the juvenile justice system is properly treating the children who come into contact with it. Children in the juvenile justice system have vast amount of needs and in order for the juvenile justice system to be effective, trauma-informed care must be the standard in the juvenile justice services.¹ To implement this standard, the adults in the system must be trained to understand trauma; screen for trauma histories and effects; and provide evidence-based treatment for these young people that enter the system.

Evidence-Based Treatments for Youth Who Have Experienced Trauma⁴

- Trauma Affect Regulation: Guide for Education and Therapy (TARGET-A) → practiced in group, individual and family formats, helping the youth and families to better understand trauma and stress and develop coping skills.
- Trauma-Focused Cognitive Behavioral Therapy (TF-CBT) → youth are taught to process trauma, manage their stressful thoughts, and enhance both their personal safety and family communication.

Local Resources

- The University of Massachusetts Medical School operates the Child Trauma Training Center (CTTC) to train both clinicians and adults who interact with children on trauma-informed care.
<http://www.umassmed.edu/cmhsr/Additional-CMHSR-Centers/Child-Trauma-Training-Center-CTTC/>
- Massachusetts Child Trauma Project is a collaborative with DCF, LUK Inc., Justice Resource Institute, Boston Medical Center, and UMass Medical School who's mission is to incorporate trauma-informed care into the child welfare system. <http://machildtraumaproject.org>

Definitions

Acute Trauma: a single traumatic event that is limited in time.

Chronic Trauma: either multiple traumatic events or trauma existing over a sustained period of time.

Complex Trauma: describes the chronic trauma an individual suffered along with the impact of that trauma on his or her life.

Adverse Childhood Experiences (ACEs): include verbal, physical and sexual abuse, and family dysfunction such as parental incarceration.

Hypervigilance: abnormally increased arousal, responsiveness, and scanning for threats.

Traumatic Reminders: any outside influence or environment that reminds a victim of a particular traumatic event. Exposure to these can cause re-traumatization.

Polyvictim: a person who is repeatedly exposed to multiple types of violence/trauma.

Child Traumatic Stress: this occurs when children and adolescents are exposed to traumatic events or situation and become less able to cope with these traumatic experiences.

Evidence-Based Practice: utilizing current reliable evidence to determine the proper policies and treatments for juveniles involved in the justice system.

Trauma Screening: a standardized mental health screening done to determine whether the child has any psychiatric conditions or traumatic stress disorders.

Cultural Competence: the ability of the juvenile justice system to understand and respect values and beliefs that differ across cultures and to have an appropriate response to working with youth and families.

Trauma-Informed Care: care provided to adolescents in the juvenile justice system that acknowledges trauma experiences and responds properly at all points of interaction with the adolescents.

Cross-Systems Collaboration: work across the agencies providing care for an adolescent to ensure that all needs are being met.

*"Every one of these children is precious and irreplaceable; they are our treasure and our country's future."*¹

Sources

¹ Attorney General's National Task Force on Children Exposed to Violence, Report (December 2012). <http://www.justice.gov/defendingchildhood/cev-rpt-full.pdf>

² Justice Policy Institute, Healing Invisible Wounds: Why Investing in Trauma-Informed Care for Children Makes Sense (July 2010). http://www.justicepolicy.org/images/upload/10-07_REP_HealingInvisibleWounds_JJ-PS.pdf

³ Ford, J. D., Chapman, J. C., Connor, D. F., & Cruise, K. C. (2012). Complex trauma and aggression in secure juvenile justice settings. *Criminal Justice & Behavior*, 39(5), 695–724. <http://njd.cjinfo.wordpress1/wp-content/uploads/2013/12/Complex-Trauma-and-Aggression-in-Secure-Juvenile-Justice-Settings.pdf>

⁴ Buffington, K., Dierkhising, C., and Marsh, S., Ten Things Every Juvenile Court Judge Should Know About Trauma and Delinquency, National Council of Juvenile and Family Court Judges (2010). http://www.reclaimingfutures.org/sites/blog.reclaimingfutures.org/files/userfiles/10-Things-Every-Juvenile-Court-Judge-Should_.pdf

⁵ The National Child Traumatic Stress Network, Trauma in the Lives of Gang-Involved Youth: Tips for Volunteers and Community Organizations. http://www.nctsn.org/nctsn_assets/pdfs/Trauma_and_gang_involved_youth.pdf

⁶ Massachusetts Alliance of Juvenile Court Clinics, *Vulnerabilities of Court-Involved Children and Families* (2013). <http://www.kidsandthelaw.org/resources/Vulnerabilities%2010.21.13.pdf>

⁷ The National Child Traumatic Stress Network, *Trauma and the Environment of Care in Juvenile Institutions* (August 2013). http://www.nijn.org/uploads/digital-library/NCTSN_trauma-and-environment-of-juvenile-care-institutions_Sue-Burrell_September-2013.pdf

⁸ Dierkhising, C., et al., Trauma histories among justice-involved youth: findings from the National Child Traumatic Stress Network (2013). <http://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pmc/articles/PMC3714673/>

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